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# CO-OPERATION OF THE BUSINESS MEN OF PITTSBURG WITH THE COMMERCIAL DEPARTMENT OF ITS HIGH SCHOOL

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While the revision of the commercial course in the Pittsburg high school was under discussion, letters were sent to many of the representative firms of the city asking them for suggestions.<sup>1</sup> The first paragraph explained that the course of study was to be lengthened from two and one-half to four years, so that more consideration might be given to the subjects then in the curriculum and so that other practical and cultural subjects might be introduced. The remainder of the letter is self-explanatory:

To realize our ideal we must have the co-operation of those directing the business interests of this region. The object of the commercial department is to prepare young men and women thoroughly to meet your needs. The instruction aims to give a general knowledge or liberal culture that will not only make our graduates fitted to do the simple mechanical work required in their daily tasks but will also give them the power to grasp your problem as a whole and to act intelligently when unexpected complications arise. The commercial applications of the different subjects will be continually emphasized. The pupil should be able to do brain work as well as hand work.

By reference to the proposed course of study you will recognize that this department is not planned upon the narrow lines of the so-called commercial colleges. . . . The course offers English, German, science, mathematics, local industries, economics, commercial geography, history, etc.

The course is so planned that pupils who cannot spend the four years may substitute shorthand and typewriting for science and plane geometry in the first and second years, and may receive a certificate for the first two years' work, which is practically the same as our former course. Those who make this change, and who later decide to graduate, may take geometry in the third year.

We should be pleased to have your opinion of this change in the course of study. We should also appreciate very much having you suggest

<sup>1</sup> Of these firms about 50 per cent. were mercantile; 20 per cent., manufacturing; and 10 per cent., technical.

what topics in the different studies should be emphasized. You in your direct contact with business affairs see many applications of these subjects and in a different way from persons in other lines of business. The business men of some of the large cities have entered into active, efficient co-operation with the high schools of commerce of their respective cities. Their part was to suggest "what should be done" and the school authorities are to say "how it shall be done." Will you not kindly give us the benefit of your experience and observation? The inclosed questions may be suggestive.

This list of questions inclosed in this letter was practically the same as Mr. F. V. Thompson, head master of the High School of Commerce of Boston, sent to the firms of that city. In addition to the direct answers to the questions, a few extracts of the letters are given. The school authorities were gratified that the desire of many firms to help the school was so strong that they wrote long letters in answer to the questions.

1. In the selection or promotion of your employees in any department of your business do you set any educational standards, such as graduation from grammar school, high school or college, as a requisite for employment? To what extent?

Of those replying, 28 per cent. set no educational standards; 40 per cent. prefer high-school graduates (3 per cent. of these preferred high-school graduates to college graduates); 14 per cent. are of the opinion that the more education, the better; 8 per cent. require only common school education; 6 per cent. prefer commercial education; 1 per cent. prefer technical school education; 1 per cent. require "brains" not "diplomas"; 1 per cent. consider prime requisite "congeniality." "I would not overlook the most essential of all requisites, and those are—good deportment and personal tidiness, which are of the utmost importance and carry great weight."

2. Do you encourage employees to continue their education, either by attendance upon night schools or by other means? By what methods?

Of those replying 33 per cent. encourage continued education; 17 per cent. encourage attendance upon night schools; 14 per cent. favor home study and Carnegie Library; 10 per cent. give personal advice and suggestions; 6 per cent. encourage instruction gained from correspondence schools; 3 per cent. discourage attendance upon night schools; 3 per cent. favor lectures on business; 1 per cent. never gave the matter any consideration; 1 per cent. advance tuition fee for attendance on private schools.

3. Do you perceive any defects in the present business training given in our high schools? If so, what defects are most striking?

Of those replying 37 per cent. see no defects in the present business training; 18 per cent. have no experience with graduates or are unfamiliar with the training given; 12 per cent. are of the opinion that the pupils have a superficial knowledge and lack thoroughness and ability to apply their instruction, and that there is too much hurrying and not enough personal supervision; 8 per cent. think the work too theoretical; 23 per cent. desire better training in spelling, grammar, and punctuation; 7 per cent. complain about the pupils' lack of initiative; 4 per cent. think penmanship is defective and almost a lost art; 2 per cent. think the course is too long.

Slovenly work, carelessness, indolence, lack of ambition are also mentioned as some of the weaknesses of graduates.

"The defects in the present school methods appear in the attempt to teach too many things to such an extent as not to be of any practical value when there is no further education after leaving high school."

"Too many young men forget that morality, earnestness of purpose, patience, and perseverance are also essential qualifications for a successful business career."

"For a long time back, I have considered a diploma from a business college an absolute handicap to an applicant, so far as it referred to his ability to take up bookkeeping or office work. My experience with business college graduates has been, that while they might be perfectly able to take a set of blank books and open them properly, according to their instructions, yet they seemed lamentably weak in the practical knowledge of the foundation principles, and were unable to accommodate themselves quickly to a system of accounting different in detail from that of their acquaintance. It may have been that I was unfortunate in my acquaintance with these graduates, but it seemed to me that they had little or no ability for initiative or deduction, and that when some part of the system that they had studied was removed or altered they were not equal to bridging the gap created."

4. In the program of studies of the commercial department, what subjects do you consider essential? What subjects now taught in other high schools do you consider non-essential?

Of those replying 75 per cent. consider English (including spelling) essential; 58 per cent., bookkeeping; 58 per cent., arithmetic; 56 per cent., penmanship; 28 per cent., shorthand; 23 per cent., typewriting; 15 per cent., mathematics; 11 per cent., commercial law; 7 per cent., commercial geography; 5 per cent., business forms; 5 per cent., history; 3 per cent., banking

and finance; 3 per cent., local industries; 3 per cent., algebra. The following subjects each received one vote; accounting, drawing, modern languages, history of commerce, constructive geometry, elementary science. It is evident that the personal equation (particular business, education, etc.) of the writer enters very largely into many of these answers.

"A man may have a great deal of knowledge, but if he cannot impart it to others he will always remain a very inefficient person in business. Many students come out with a great amount of information in the various sciences, but without the ability to express themselves clearly and accurately. Of all subjects that come up in school, I think that of English composition is probably the most important."

"Some years ago I was asked what mathematics had been the most useful in my thirty years of experience as an engineer, and in a very solemn, earnest, and, in fact, truthful, manner, I replied that it was the complete mastery of the 'Queen's English.'"

5. For a young man entering your employ, which of the enumerated clerical subjects is it necessary to know: stenography, typewriting, bookkeeping? What other lines of training will be more valuable as a preparation for a business career in your house?

Of those replying 32 per cent. think that bookkeeping alone is essential; 28 per cent. state that all three are necessary; 19 per cent. think that none of the three subjects is essential; 15 per cent. think that penmanship is essential; 11 per cent. think that mathematics is necessary; 11 per cent. consider a knowledge of good English indispensable; 8 per cent. think that arithmetic is valuable; 4 per cent. state that typewriting and bookkeeping are necessary; 3 per cent. think that designing and advertising are valuable.

"The training which comes from experience in our own particular methods is most valuable to us."

"Students should be taught to be constantly learning after graduation."

"We think training along the lines of giving the boys a high ideal of commercial integrity is of great value; also, inculcation of the necessity of concentration and industry."

"The development of common sense and good judgment in all studies is far more valuable than all the technical education that can be given young men when sent out into the world to fill positions."

"Another very important thing which I imagine is not dwelt on as much as it should be is the ability to observe quickly and accurately."

6. Should the commercial department attempt to train for particular types of business, e.g., mercantile, transportation, banking, etc.?

Of those replying 60 per cent. think that the department should not train for particular types of business; 40 per cent. think it should.

"Give the student a sound foundation and let him master the business by working in it."

"I think that it is not desirable for a commercial school to undertake to turn out merchants, bankers, or transportation functionaries, but to give its students such a good general groundwork in business principles and practice that their entrance into banks, stores, and railroad offices will be facilitated and their progress rapid."

"The writer is of the opinion that it would not be best to specialize too much. The motto of the public high school must necessarily be 'The highest good to the greatest number.' Most of your graduates will not be in a position to wait for openings in special lines, but will have to take whatever first opens up to them; hence, it would appear that the course giving the best all-round training would do the most good."

"Unless the student has made up his mind to devote himself to some of the professions, I think it would be much better to give him a good sensible foundation to build on, and then let him rear his business structure later when he has discovered his affinity; for one of the most pathetic sights to me is the square peg fitted into a round hole."

7. It is manifest that to fulfil its best purposes this school should keep in constant touch with the business world and advance with the evolution of mercantile development. What methods can you suggest of promoting such a relation between this school and the business interests of the city?

Of those replying 55 per cent. suggest that lectures or talks be given to the pupils by men representing the various industrial and mercantile houses of the city. Several suggest holding conferences with the heads of business houses.

One suggestion is that the school get into touch with the Chamber of Commerce.

"The reading of daily newspapers followed by free discussion among the pupils would be helpful."

"Have the faculty visit business houses and observe methods used."

"Employ graduates of high school in preference to others, and have them give their experience to you for future benefit."

"We believe that the schools of any city from first to last are for the training of the mind so that students may be able to conceive with least effort the duties which confront them. To train for a special purpose would be overlooking the fundamental principles for which these schools are organized and maintained."

"Endeavor to get in your faculty men who have had several years of practical experience in addition to their own business education."

These communications were received as live sparks from the real hammering and forging of business and were of great assistance in learning what are the subjects that are considered to be the most important by the men who are maintaining Pittsburg's high place in the commercial world. To the writers of these letters a cordial invitation was extended to visit the commercial department, to inspect the excellent equipment, and to inform the school when they were in need of clerical help.

The daily papers printed the questions and in well-written editorials urged the business men to co-operate with the school. In the first year of the new course the pupils study local industries. Since there is no textbook on this subject, the school asked representative men to talk to the classes on their respective industries, which they did willingly. In many cases the address was preceded by a visit on the part of the classes to the manufacturing plant, where the different processes were explained, and in many cases samples of the products at different stages were given to the school for use in recitation and in the museum. One well-known firm gave the entire class (350) a luncheon composed of the various products of its manufacture.

The plan for the day school was so well received that letters were written to the employers of the twelve hundred young people enrolled in the Evening High School. These men were asked to suggest what subjects should be taught tonight that would help their employees tomorrow. Replies to the circular letter were prompt and expressed an earnest desire to co-operate. In some instances the letter was discussed at a regular meeting of corporation directors, and in practically all cases the answer was signed by some high official. The firms distributed among their employees circulars describing the Evening High School, and one firm inclosed the circular in the pay-envelope of each person on its rolls. On the application blank for admission to the school is a place for the remarks and signature of the employer. Reports of the quality of the work done by the pupils will be sent to the employer if desired.